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Weekend of Sunday, December 19, 2021

4th Sunday of Advent/Year C

First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:46b-55

Sermon Title: “Hope for Those Who are Wounded”

Theme

Cradle and cross are inextricably connected on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Between a lovely tribute to the little town of Bethlehem and Mary’s magnificent song of praise, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us in no uncertain terms that Christ’s advent is for “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” It is the kind of tension in which the church always lives as when in holy communion—with high delight—“we proclaim the Lord’s death.”

Texts:

First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

^{5a}and he shall be the one of peace.

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,

but a body you have prepared for me;
⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

⁷Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”

⁸When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” [

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Sermon

The word of the day this 4th weekend of Advent is “*Wounded.*” That sounds like a happy and joyous start to our 4th Sunday of Advent sermon, doesn't it? To reach my conclusion, which *is* happy and joyous, I need to give you a brief history lesson to set the stage.

As I have been saying throughout Advent, Israel had not prospered since the end of King David's reign in 970 BCE. After David, the unified kingdom of Israel divided into two kingdoms; the northern kingdom that retained the name Israel, and the southern kingdom that became known as Judah. However, you may recall that God made the Davidic Covenant with David in which God promised there would always be an heir of King David on the throne of Israel and that Jerusalem was the only acceptable place for worship of the God of Israel.

Well, after the kingdom divided, the northern kingdom of Israel elected its own king, who was obviously not from the line of David, and to prevent their people from going south to Jerusalem to worship, make sacrifices and offerings, they came up with their own center of worship, known as Mount Gerizim. Of course, these two acts broke the Davidic Covenant which led to their demise. As a result of their disobedience and faithfulness, they were overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

The southern kingdom of Judah, whose people became known as the Judahites, and much later, shortened to simply the *Jews*, held on longer, but they too were overrun by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians, followed by the Persians, followed by the Greeks, followed by the Romans.

Does any of this matter? Yes, because the prophet Micah, mentioned three Kings of Judah in his writings and that places his ministry between 742 and 686 BCE which spanned the period of the last years of the divided kingdom, through the first years of the one surviving kingdom of Judah.

I think it can be argued that from the death of King David until the end of the Second World War, the Israelites by any other name were *wounded*. They were disobedient and faithless and because they turned their backs on God, God loved them enough to let them choose their own way – to their peril. They brought punishment upon themselves at the hands of their enemies. We can read their

laments and cries to God in the psalms among other places. But let's be clear, God did not bring punishment upon them, they brought it upon themselves, and their enemies were the vehicles by which their punishment was delivered. God wanted to be their defender and protector, but they chose their own way. And as a result, they were *wounded*. I wonder if you can relate. I'll come back to that.

Back to the First Reading from Micah, Micah prophesied that God was about to come to the rescue of his people. And God was going to do this most unusually. God was going to send a savior, and that savior was going to come from Bethlehem of Judah.

Bethlehem at that time was a no-account village people walked through to get to where they were going. This savior's origin was to be "from of old" – that was the best Micah could do to express "in the beginning", and as we know from the Gospel of John, "in the beginning" Jesus was part of the divine community, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Micah went on to use shepherding imagery – ⁴"he shall stand and feed his flock;" and they, the Judahites, "shall live secure, for now he shall be great" not them, but their savior, ⁵"and he shall be the one of peace."

God's people were *wounded*. They *wounded* each other out of jealousy and disregard for God. They *wounded* themselves with their disobedience and faithlessness to God. And their enemies *wounded* them as their subjects.

Six or seven hundred years later, the old priest Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel who told him that Elizabeth, his old and barren wife would bear a son who would serve the LORD in a very specific role. He would be given the "spirit and power of Elijah" and prepare the way for the LORD. Zechariah couldn't believe this news because both he and his wife were old, well beyond child-bearing age. They were scorned in the community, because in those days, to be childless was to be cursed by God. For the sake of the theme of the day, let's say they were *wounded*. Zechariah was less of a man because he had no progeny. Elizabeth was less of a woman because she could not produce a son for her husband. They were both *wounded*. But God was going to take away their shame; their *woundedness*! Could this be true?

Meanwhile in Nazareth, a young girl had ^{1:30}"found favor with God." What that meant was that God saw that she was a suitable human vessel through which God

could produce God's Son. It must have been a frightening experience. Young unmarried girls don't want to be pregnant. She might have felt *wounded* too.

We know nothing about her parents, we can only imagine what they must have thought. Maybe in their shame, they decided that Mary should leave town, to hide their disgrace. I am willing to bet Mary's parents were *wounded*. They had already arranged her marriage to a good man by the name of Joseph, and now, they had to have presumed, Mary had scuttled the deal.

The Gospel Reading for today is the story of that visit. Pregnant Mary dropped in on her pregnant Aunt Elizabeth and it was at the mere sound of her voice that the baby inside Elizabeth jumped. Well, you heard the rest, Mary got the affirmation she needed: that she wasn't a liar or cheater; that God was indeed using her to do a great work – indeed, the greatest work God had ever done! Mary sang out in one of the great hymns of the New Testament. God will finally heal the *wounds* of all people!

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I've been *wounded* a couple of times. I fell on a rock when I was 6 and got some stitches in my knee. I've been bitten by dogs three times. Had surgery once. These are the *wounds* of torn flesh, loss of blood, and physical pain. We could go around the room and talk about our *wounds*. That would certainly be a surprise inclusion to worship this 4th Weekend of Advent.

But these are not the only kind of *wounds* we experience, these are just the ones we can see. Furthermore, I don't think these are examples of the kinds of *woundedness* the composer of our Advent Wreath lighting liturgy was talking about. I think the kinds of *woundedness* that the liturgy speaks of is more dangerous, troubling, and damaging. I am sure having a burst appendix is painful. But it can be diagnosed, and surgically removed, and in time, there will be a complete recovery.

But I think you will all agree that there are other kinds of *woundedness* that aren't that easily healed. I've been your pastor for more than nine years, ten years May 1. Some of you have let me into your lives and I treasure your stories in my heart and will never betray you. So I will continue speaking generally, not specifically, and

including myself. You may hear yourself being talked about, but I assure you, this is you relating to what I am saying, not me talking about you.

Some of us are *wounded* by our parents. This *wound* is particularly difficult to heal because the damage may have been done in our formative years.

Some of us are *wounded* by bullies in school – classmates who selfishly felt better about themselves by victimizing others they were probably jealous of.

Some of us are *wounded* by lovers – ones we married and divorced; ones we did not or could not marry; maybe ones we are currently married to.

Some of us are *wounded* by our vocations. We feel we are overlooked; given too much responsibility; unfairly compensated; disciplined; fired.

Some of us are truly physically or mentally *wounded*. We were born with birth defects, or something happened during our lives and now we have some permanent damage.

And the opposite of each of these could be true.

- Maybe we *wounded* our parents.
- Maybe we were the bullies who *wounded* others.
- Maybe we *wounded* our lovers and spouses.
- Maybe we *wounded* our employers
- Or maybe because of some action we did, we *wounded* another.

These actions we took might be the source of our *wounds* of guilt and remorse.

Again, I could allow all of us to discuss how we've been *wounded*, but if you are like me, I'd much rather talk about the dog bites than any of these other *wounds*. And I sure don't want to talk about those I might have *wounded*. It's just too painful, even today.

Did you notice that I have been speaking in the present tense? “Some of us ARE *wounded*.” “Some of us *wound* others.” Am I right about this that some of these

emotional *wounds* are more difficult to heal than physical *wounds*? To some degree, do they define our present reality?

We hear stories of the redemption of Israel like our First Reading from Micah, and the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary from the Gospel and I wonder if we lose sight of the real *woundedness* they felt. It's all *baby in a manger*, *silent night*, and *sleigh bells* for us this time of year.

I wonder if, when we hear these stories, we don't get myopic thinking that God in Christ came at a specific time to fix a specific problem, that really doesn't have anything to do with us.

Well, I am here to correct that line of thinking. That is not what went on more than two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, and not what is going on in our relationship with God now – whether we know it or not. That baby that caused Elizabeth's baby to jump in her womb, that caused Mary to sing out in joy, was called Emmanuel, "God with us."

- Not God stepping in and fixing all our mistakes.
- Not God punishing all those who did us wrong.
- Not God making all our dreams come true.

- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is with us in all our life's moments, the good times and the bad, the disappointments and the celebrations.
- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is with us to encourage us to live up to his example and is with us to pick us up when we fail, to forgive us, and to encourage us to try again.
- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is with us when we *wound* another to encourage us to ask for forgiveness and then forgive ourselves.
- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, knows us better than we know ourselves.
- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, knows our addiction and obsession, our depression and anxiety, our failures and misgivings; our lack of faith and insecurities.

- Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, was with us at our creation and knows us better than we know ourselves, and so that should make us wonder why we hide *from* him instead of run *to* him.

Yes, we are *wounded*, but Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is our great healer. The apostle Paul, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, our Second Reading, reminded us that Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, took the place of all those sacrifices that were required regularly on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul wrote that it is by God's will that we have been sanctified (i.e., made holy) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all." "Once and for all!"

So why are we the walking *wounded*?

Why do we constantly have to be reminded to give it up?

Why do we insist on remaining the victims of our own *woundedness*?

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, has taken all our *woundedness* upon himself and it died with him on the cross. It's no longer ours. We no longer have to continue in our own woundedness.

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us has set us free! For us to hang on to it is like rejecting the very gift of Christmas which is Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, is still with us to encourage us, and inspire us, and lead us to do better. So let's do that. Let's be happy and joyous. And be at peace.

Prayer

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, we give you thanks for your mission to save the world with your love, grace, and mercy. Thank you for coming to us when we are wounded and when we wound. Heal our broken hearts, lives, and spirits this Advent, and prepare us for the celebration of your breaking into our darkness. We pray this in your name. Amen